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DCI/IC-75-3936

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
SUBJECT : "Distortion" of Intelligence for Policy Purposes

1. Problem

How should the Intelligence Community respond to allegations that policy-level pressures result in "distortion" of substantive intelligence products to fit policy purposes.

2. Position of the Congressional Committees

The Senate Select Committee has not raised any questions in this field. The House Select Committee, however, is actively pursuing a thesis that (1) policy-level pressure is exerted to influence intelligence judgments (the Sam Adams public testimony before the HSC relates to this), or that (2) intelligence estimates are drafted with a view toward being responsive toward what are viewed as the desires of the policy makers.

3. Discussion

a. Allegations that intelligence has been distorted to suit particular policies or policy makers are substantially untrue. With limited qualifications noted later, there have been remarkably few attempts from the policy side over the years to dictate intelligence judgments. And the few times it has been tried, it has been resisted, and at worst some acrimonious debate over contentious issues has occasionally led to solutions which satisfied no one entirely, but were as good as could be arrived at in the current state of information. Thus, even those who believe the worst case charges leveled against intelligence [redacted] for example) have to acknowledge that the process gave the dissident view a hearing, right up to the top.

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b. The single most important reason for this record is personal and subjective. Most professional intelligence officers know (or soon learn) that credibility is their most precious stock in trade, and most policy officials come to appreciate this and to live with it. Those on either side who do not, soon become discounted by their colleagues. If these intrinsic disciplines are ever weakened in the profession, no amount of institutional tinkering could guarantee objectivity; and if this self-regulating spirit remains strong, almost any reasonable institutional system can produce objective results. Thus, the overriding need for intelligence is to have competent and dedicated professionals.

c. These people can be helped by procedural and bureaucratic safeguards. A number of these have been used over the years, often repeatedly. For example:

(1) The process of coordination of national intelligence carries with it the right and obligation of dissent. Time and again, National Intelligence Estimates and similar assessments have recorded differences of judgment on particular issues or even broad points of view. The vast majority of these have been honest and legitimate differences of opinion on the evidence. A small number, aimed at supporting particular policies, have been few and far between. Those stand on the record for all to see, and they fooled no one at the time or since. The process which encourages and even requires dissents thus serves not only as a badge against enforced conformity, but also forces both the majority and minority to lay their views on the line, identified as such. This is a good inducement to responsibility.

(2) The Community has engaged in frequent retrospective assessments, post mortems of various kinds, in which past performance is carefully weighed in hindsight and reviewed among other things for conscious or unconscious policy biases. Indeed, the Intelligence Community probably does more of this than any other area of Government operations. And this too serves as a deterrent against irresponsibility.

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(3) A large and active program of dialogue with the scholarly community, carried on by all production offices in CIA, State/INR and DIA assures that outside perceptions and insights of both specialist and generalists are brought to bear both to review past production and to suggest further approaches.

d. When all this has been said, the record must be discussed with certain realistic qualifications in mind.

(1) First, intelligence is not prepared in an ivory tower and is not prepared primarily to provide the stuff of post mortems. It is prepared in the real world for the real use of real policy makers. It is also prepared constantly--daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly--from a stream of incomplete, fragmentary, and often conflicting evidence. It must try to provide answers--repertorial, analytical or estimative--to questions which are sometimes known only to a few leaders in closed societies, and sometimes are literally unknowable to anyone anywhere at the time of writing.

(2) ~~Secondly~~, it must help the policy officer make intelligence choices. If it tells him only what he wants to hear, it fails. But if it addresses only irrelevant or easy questions, or the right questions at the wrong time, it loses in usefulness whatever it might gain in a kind of accuracy.

(3) Thirdly, the more important the question, especially in areas where knowledge is incomplete, the more closely and critically will decision makers look at intelligence reports and estimates. And while it may be argued that here is where pressures to distort or suppress are most likely to arise, it is also true that precisely here is where competent professionals will be most jealous of their credibility. If they are unable to stick to objective standards in dialogue with the policy side, they do not belong in the profession and will probably soon learn or be told as much.

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(4) Finally, unless there is effective communication between policy and intelligence, the one will be ill-informed and the other academic. And close communication between them inevitably produces some tensions, some clashes of perspective, some divergences of aim. Policy makers have objectives and preferences, and it is only human of them to value what helps them toward their goals and to be irritated at what hinders them. Presidential memoirs and especially contemporary documents allude with greater or less irritation to the inconvenient voice of intelligence getting in the way of what leaders wanted to do. Sometimes intelligence prevailed, sometimes it was overridden by other considerations.

e. The Intelligence Community has learned, over the years, that intelligence cannot compel national leaders to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" its every pronouncement. These leaders are their own men, possessed of powers and seized of problems in operational situations, often having to factor into their decisions matters which are well beyond the province of foreign intelligence. But intelligence does have a right, and this right has been observed almost without exception over 25 or more years, to be heard. In the last analysis, policy makers cannot be forced to heed intelligence, but we and they know that they can ignore it only at their peril. The Community cannot hope for more.

4. Recommendations

This is a problem area on which initiative action should be taken by the DCI. The House Select Committee hearing schedule, as presently known, does not suggest an occasion on which DCI comments could be appropriately introduced. It is recommended, therefore, that a letter to Congressman Pike be prepared for signature by the DCI, generally reflecting the comments outlined in the foregoing discussion. Prior to its dispatch, it is suggested the letter be discussed with the ICG.

/s/

Samuel V. Wilson
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Chairman, Ad Hoc Task Group